

Romans 11:1-2a, 29-33

Matthew 15:21-28

Introduction

One of the things I like to do when reading the Gospels is to imagine myself into the story and think about how I would have reacted if I was there with Jesus and his Disciples. Life with Jesus was never boring and sometimes the things he said and did were very unpredictable and surprised or shocked his followers. Today's reading from a modern standpoint is very shocking indeed.

In a society where the 'Black Lives Matter' movement has come very much to the fore, where we are conscious of racism and where allegations of anti-Semitism have rocked the Labour Party Jesus's response to this woman, firstly in ignoring her and then in what he said at the very least raises eyebrows if not makes me cringe. So what is going on here? What is this all about?

Well let's start by looking at the context of this story. As we have travelled with Jesus and his Disciples through Matthew's account over the past few weeks we have seen three things: The depth of human need Jesus was meeting, the demands of the crowds upon his time and energy and the conflict with the Pharisees, the Jewish religious leaders who had travelled specially from Jerusalem to Galilee to confront him and question his teaching and behavior.

The time was coming in Jesus' ministry when things were going to become very difficult indeed for him and his followers and he needed time and space to prepare them for what lay ahead. It has been clear that for Jesus that had been impossible to find, even when exhausted and grieving. So he travelled with his disciples up country and actually out of Israel to the region of Tyre and Sidon where the Phoenicians lived. There, for at least a time, he would be safe from the malignant hostility of the Scribes and Pharisees and his dangerous popularity with the crowds. This is because no Jew would be likely to follow him into Gentile (non-Jewish) territory. And, in fact, this is the only record we have of him leaving Jewish territory at all.

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But even in these foreign parts Jesus was not free of the noisy demand of human need. There was a woman who had a daughter who was grievously afflicted. She must have heard somehow of the wonderful things that Jesus could do and she followed him and his disciples crying desperately for help.

The problem for Jesus was not that she needed help but that her request broke through the time line. She is ahead of events. What I mean by that is that Jesus was absolutely clear that his mission was initially to redeem the house of Jacob, the people of Israel, God's chosen people; and through them salvation would spread to the rest of the world. This was in God's plan from the beginning and we see it reflected in the prophecies of the Old Testament. We see in the Acts of the Apostles that the early church promoted the equality of the Gentiles to receive God's blessing. So the problem was not that she was a Gentile but that she was ahead of the game, before her time.

Jesus was clear that his mission at this point in his ministry was to bring salvation only to the lost sheep of Israel – redemption would be offered to the whole world when he had accomplished his original purpose. At this current time he couldn't afford to be distracted by people who generally lived in hostility to the Jews. He had to preserve his energy and resources for the task in hand. It is in this context that Jesus initially ignored her pleas for help and then appeared to be unforgivably rude to her.

He turned to her and said, "It is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the pet dogs!" To call a person a dog was a deadly and a contemptuous insult. The Jews spoke with arrogant insolence about 'Gentile Dogs' 'infidel dogs' and later 'Christian Dogs'. In those days the dogs were the unclean scavengers of the street – lean, savage and often diseased. But there are two things to remember as we digest Jesus' words:

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- 1.) The tone and the look with which a thing is said make all the difference. Something which sounds hard can be said with a disarming smile. We can call a friend, 'an idiot' or 'silly twit' with a smile and tone which will take all the sting out of it and fill it with affection. I am sure that as Jesus said this to her the smile on his face and the compassion in his eyes robbed the words of all insult and bitterness.
- 2.) The word Jesus used was the diminutive word for dogs (kunaria) and the Kunaria were not the street dogs, but the household pets which were very different from the wild dogs that roamed the streets.

The woman was a Greek and she was quick to understand Jesus' meaning and replied with the Greek trademark wit. "True" she said, "but even the dogs get their share of the crumbs which fall from their master's table." You can imagine Jesus' eyes lighting up with joy at such irrepressible, indomitable faith and he granted her the blessing and the healing that she so much desired.

So what can we learn from this woman.

Well firstly she had love. She made the misery of her child her own. She might have been a heathen but in her heart there was that love for her child that is always a reflection of God's love for his children. It was love that made her approach this stranger; it was love that made her accept his silence yet continue to appeal to him; it was love that made her accept the apparent rebuff. It was love that enabled her to see the compassion above and behind the words of Jesus. The apostle John said, "Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God", and despite the fact that she was of a race that did not worship God his love was present in her.

Secondly she had faith. And it was a faith that grew through her contact with Jesus. She began by calling him 'Son of David' which was a popular title, a political title. It was a title that looked on Jesus as a great and powerful wonder worker but

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which looked on him in terms of earthly power and glory. She came asking help from someone she believed to be a great and powerful man. She came with a kind of superstition as she might have approached a magician. She ended by calling Jesus Lord. Jesus made her look at him clearly and through their encounter she saw his divinity. It was this understanding Jesus wanted her to have before he granted her request. Her faith grew in her encounter with Jesus and it finally became a faith that not only asked for something but a faith that worshipped. She came with a request but ended kneeling in prayer.

Thirdly the woman had astonishing persistence. She was undiscourageable. (Not a word you'd find in the dictionary but a good description). So many people pray because they don't want to miss a chance. They aren't sure their prayer will be answered but think that something might just possibly happen if they pray. This woman came because Jesus was not just a possible helper, he was her only hope. She came with a passionate hope, an overwhelming sense of need. She had the supremely effective quality of prayer – she was in deadly earnest. For her prayer wasn't a ritual form it was a passionate desire of her soul which somehow felt that she could not, would not take no for an answer.

Then finally this woman had a gift of cheerfulness. She was in the midst of trouble and in deadly earnest yet she could smile. She could respond cheerfully and with humour and with the light of hope.

This woman brought to Jesus a gallant and an audacious love, a faith which grew until it worshipped at the feet of the Lord, an indomitable persistence springing from an unconquerable hope and a cheerfulness that would not be dismayed. This is the attitude that we can learn so much from and that cannot fail to find an answer to its prayers.